

Vermiculated Fishing Owl: how to see one

To the usual difficulties associated with seeing night birds add the fact that the Vermiculated Fishing Owl is confined largely to the Congo basin, most of which falls within countries rarely visited by birders, that it has specific habitat requirements and is apparently scarce, then getting to see this species becomes quite a challenge. Although it is entirely nocturnal and of a retiring nature, it is quite a vocal species. This useful trait, combined with good information on its likely whereabouts, improves your chances of seeing one.

The first key to locating this owl successfully is to be aware of its habitat preferences - riparian and rain forests bordering medium to large rivers (greater than about 10m wide in my experience). No one has reported the species from extensive swamps, nor along smaller streams within contiguous primary rain forests, although in Congo it is quite common in the flooded forests of the Kouilou Basin¹. The second and most important key to seeing this bird, therefore, is access to a boat!

Currently, one of the most reliable places to find the Vermiculated Fishing Owl is along the Rembo N'Dogo river near Gamba in south-west Gabon. Birders have reported it from along the Ivindo River and its tributaries north-east of Makokou in north-east Gabon, but one site along the Rembo N'Dogo allows the observer the opportunity of seeing the species from dry land.

The Rembo N'Dogo is a long tributary of the N'Dogo Lagoon, about 25m wide, bordered by swamp forest, and with only a couple of small fishing villages along its banks. The best time to go is during the dry season, that is between June and September.

Although rather remote, Gamba - which survives purely on its proximity to producing oil fields - is accessible by air from the capital Libreville. From the airport it is 10km to the town, situated on the edge of the lagoon. Here, visitors can obtain basic accommodation, pirogues (motorised canoes), boatmen, all necessary provisions and supplies. If in doubt, one reliable contact seems to be Paul, the manager of Biffa's Boozer in the town. Paul should be able to put you in contact with Shell workers prepared to take you up Rembo N'Dogo (probably over a weekend).

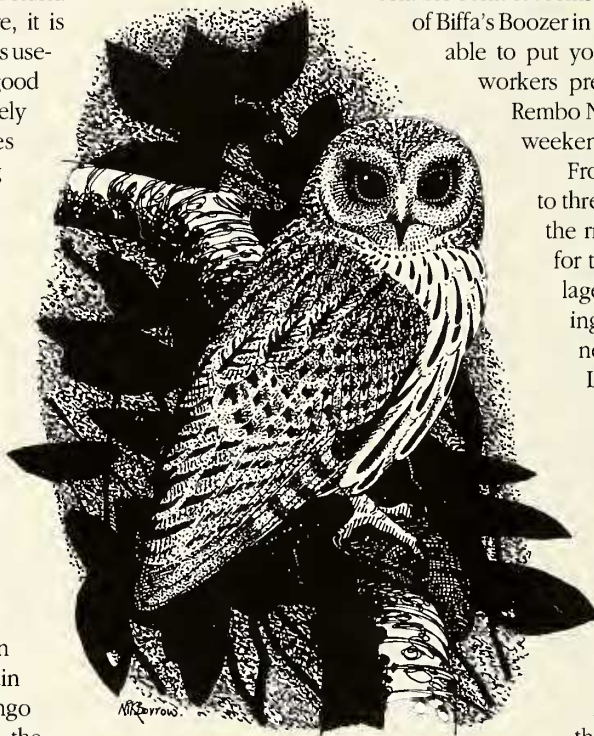
From Gamba it is only two to three hours to the mouth of the river, which is navigable for the 100km to Bongo village. However, from a birding point of view, it is only necessary to go as far as Lac Kivoro, two to three hours up-stream. I would recommend spending at least two days and a night on the river since its remote location makes it an excellent location for viewing both birds and mammals.

The best site, both for camping and seeing the Vermiculated Fishing Owl, is a sizeable cleared area on the east side, which is the start of an old logging road, about two thirds of the way towards Lac

Kivoro. Tell the boatman you want to camp at the old embarcadère. At least one pair of Vermiculated Fishing Owl occur in the trees around the campsite. If you are unsuccessful here, take the boat up and down river a couple of kilometres and scan the riverside trees with a powerful light. The owls usually sit between five and 15m above the water.

A bonus is that another highly elusive African species, the White-backed Night Heron *Gorsachius leuconotus*, is exceptionally common upstream from the campsite. You will see it feeding on exposed sand-bars during the dry season. ☺

¹Malimbus 15: 68-80 (1993)



Vermiculated Fishing Owl
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